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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000324

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

NSC FOR SENIOR DIRECTOR DR. GREEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: EASTER CELEBRATIONS PEACEFUL IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM

¶1. (SBU) Our contacts in the recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and in the unofficial house church movement have told us that their Easter celebrations largely were peaceful throughout southern Vietnam, including the Central Highlands. Our contacts in the Central Highlands provinces of Gia Lai and Dak Lak report that all SECV churches were allowed to operate normally, although one of the four recognized SECV churches in Dak Lak faced some police harassment in the days before Easter. A pastor in Gia Lai added that the SECV is planning to consecrate a new church as well as to launch a provincial-level Bible training class for new pastors immediately after Easter under the provisions of Vietnam's new legal framework on religion. House churches were allowed to operate normally in Gia Lai Province. In Dak Lak Province, Protestant families were allowed to celebrate in small groups. A contact reported that one house church in Kontum Province affiliated with the World United Evangelical Mission apparently was not allowed to hold Easter services; its members were directed to other churches.

¶2. (SBU) Easter celebrations throughout the HCMC area went smoothly. All house churches operated without incident. Our contacts told us that police encouraged house churches to restrict the size of some of their gatherings to a few hundred or less; one house church apparently was denied permission to hold Easter services for 1,500 in a local restaurant, although the organizers acknowledged to us that this could easily have been for public safety and fire code reasons. According to our house church contacts, in addition to the one house church in Kontum, another two house churches, one in the Mekong Delta province of Ca Mau and another in the coastal province of Phu Yen, faced police harassment, although they ultimately were allowed to hold Easter services. Our contacts say that between six and seven thousand house churches conduct services throughout Vietnam on any given Sunday. The majority of these are located in Vietnam's southern and central regions.

WINNICK